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Book Reviews

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Review of *Necroculture* by Charles Thorpe (Palgrave Macmillan)

Seth Cosimini

ABSTRACT Charles Thorpe's *Necroculture* attempts to demonstrate that the variegated experiences of alienation under the technocratic culture of neoliberal capital are experiences tantamount to a culture of death. Thorpe suggests that the root of the necrophilia that defines contemporary capitalist culture is in the valuing of non-living objects over living human beings. In the alienation and replacement of imperfect human labor with automated dead labor and in a highly atomized consumer culture where social participation is mediated by commodity fetishism, the non-living are given priority over the living.

Necroculture. By Charles Thorpe. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 270 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978 1 137 58302 4. US List: \$99.99.

Building upon a variety of works from Karl Marx and Marxist psychologist Erich Fromm, Charles Thorpe's *Necroculture* attempts to demonstrate that the variegated experiences of alienation under the technocratic culture of neoliberal capital are experiences tantamount to a culture of death. The collection of five essays examining different aspects of this culture of death build from a synthesis of Marx's understanding of alienation and Fromm's "necrophilia." Beyond the obvious markers of a cultural attraction to death—such as a popular culture fascinated with the prospect of a zombie apocalypse (28) or an industry dedicated to supplying "doomsday preppers" (211)—Thorpe suggests that the root of the necrophilia that defines contemporary capitalist culture is in the valuing of non-living objects over living human beings. In the alienation and replacement of imperfect human labor with automated dead labor and in a highly atomized consumer culture where social participation is mediated by commodity fetishism, the non-living are given priority over the living. For Thorpe, this constitutes a culture that worships death, that is, dead labor.

The opening chapter helpfully situates Thorpe's terminology and claim that we are living in a culture that "aggrandizes the dead and non-living over the living" (2). Through an exegesis of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in conjunction with analyses of popular cultural artifacts representing the living dead, from vampires to zombies, Thorpe presents readers with a truly capacious definition of alienation. Encompassing the extraction of labor power, commodity fetishism, the destruction of the planet, and post-human visions of automated workforces, Thorpe's contemporary conception of alienation renders "life dependent on the non-living" (37). Participation in the social world of twenty-first century Western society demands the ravenous consumption of commodity objects and the ability to consume requires the giving over of labor power to create dead capital for wages. To Thorpe, these relations demonstrate a capitalist world of social relations that primarily values the non-living: a necroculture.

The second chapter pushes the first's analysis further in a study of the ways that technological advancement, from industrial agriculture to biotechnology, remakes the natural world from a place abundant with life into a landscape of death, that is, a world subsumed into capital that is devoid of life. Beyond the clear dangers posed by drastic reduction in biodiversity and violent reality of climate catastrophe globally, the bio- and bionanotechnological possibilities to make life "artificial" in the relentless pursuit of capital is the true threat to and destruction of what Thorpe takes to be stable categories of nature and the human (67). While genetic manipulation of crops and livestock subsumes the natural world to the capitalist control of predictability and production, Thorpe views the bioengineering mission to reduce life to standardized and replaceable parts as an artificial process that overvalues the non-living at a cost to life in pursuit of predictability, efficiency, and productivity (72–3).

In the third chapter, Thorpe extends his arguments regarding "artificial life" to the future of a de-corporeal experience celebrated in the works of the major techno-futurists Eric Drexler, Hans Moravec, and Ray Kurzweil. This chapter examines the limited scope and dangerous ahistoricity of the technological imagination that draws a linear progression of technology's evolutionary path through the elimination of the imperfect human from (138). Perhaps the most literal example of this techno-futurist necroculture is Kurzweil's concept of Singularity, which positions the history of human struggle and desire as subordinate to a linear progression of technological advancement facilitated by capitalist social relations (97). For Thorpe, "linear time expresses the autonomous and independent trajectory of technology" that values non-living technologies of evermore rapid technological advancement and the static social relations that capitalism requires over the living human experiences (100).

Chapter four is perhaps where Thorpe most directly takes up Fromm's definition of "necrophilia." More than just an attraction to death, Fromm's necrophilia is, as Thorpe restates it, a destructive and libidinal "passion to transform that which is alive into something unalive" (4). Critical of the Internet's possibilities for the radically free mobility of information, which Thorpe sees as an analogue to and facilitator of global markets (163), this chapter turns to the trafficking of women, and pornographic images of women and children, to demonstrate the Internet's ability to facilitate necrophilia. Obliquely building from the work of major feminist thinkers Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Thorpe's argument for the sadistic quality of pornography is rooted neither in problems of patriarchy nor masculinity but instead in computer-mediated experiences of alienation (171, 190). According to Thorpe, degrading women by reducing them to non-living objects-images and Internet-surfing through pornographic websites fulfills the sadistic "desire to annihilate women as human subjects" with the ultimate aim of experiencing a destructive power and control facilitated by capitalist market relations (178).

Necroculture's concluding chapter unpacks the negative liberty that defines America's extreme commitment to classical liberalism through the flashpoint of the now waning libertarian-populist Tea Party movement. Their aggressive protection of individual rights to private property illustrates Thorpe's expansive understanding of necrophilia, that is, valuing non-living property over collective human well-being. However, in the apocalyptic vision of doomsday preppers and Tea Party members is an even more extreme example of the atomization he describes as the ravenous conclusion of negative liberty. In the necrocultural will for the "destruction of society" (213), the gun becomes the primary symbol of negative freedom. Guns enable their owners to end life in the pursuit of claiming and protecting their property (224), including themselves (222). Under this

framework, the total destruction of community and interdependent relations is required to fulfill the promise of negative freedom.

Ultimately, in taking up this interpretive framework of alienation and necrophilia, Thorpe's methodology is irresponsibly limited to a strictly class-based cultural analysis of our contemporary moment. *Necroculture* sets aside feminist and anti-racist theoretical traditions for understanding patriarchal and race-based violence. For example, in extended examinations of sexual objectification of women through the pornography industry and extrajudicial vigilante murders of Black Americans, Thorpe's text takes class antagonism and experiences of alienation to be the only relevant heuristic in a critical examination of the West's contemporary culture of decay and death.

In this regard, *Necroculture* offers opportunities to and, I argue, requires the reader to extend this "necrocultural" conceptual framework beyond the works of Marx and Fromm to consider other theoretical traditions concerned with histories of exploitation and thanatopolitics. What might Thorpe's necroculture of the West have to do with the necropolitical death-worlds that Achille Mbembe identifies as a key feature of colonial states? Where does this techno-futurist necroculture of alienation fit into the critical histories of social death and slavery, and the social deaths that came in slavery's aftermath? Ranging from feminist critical inquiries into historical and cultural femicide to neocolonial destruction wrought by the global debt economy, and including other perspectives, an assortment of non-class based inquiries remain unaddressed in Thorpe's text, yet they must be considered in relationship to any reading of this book.

 [Bio](#)



Seth Cosimini

Seth Cosimini is a PhD candidate in English at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. His research engages with the literature, culture, and thought of the African diaspora and also with American literature and performance studies. His dissertation is "Imagined Cemeteries: Mortuary Rituals, Race, and Violence in American Literature."



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